

LONELINESS

What is loneliness?

Loneliness does not necessarily mean being alone. For example, you can feel lonely when you are with many others in a class, at a party or at a sporting event.

Loneliness is a painful awareness that you are not feeling connected to others.

Loneliness is usually a combination of a state of mind (which you can change) and behaviours that compound the problem (which you can change). If you are lonely you may find yourself engaging in some of the following behaviors that can perpetuate the problem:

- Are you falsely assuming that nobody likes you? Can you look for indicators that this isn't true? (i.e. challenge your thoughts). How would you know if someone liked you, even a little bit? (*suggestions: they stop and talk if you do, they smile at you*)
- Do you make little attempt to get involved in social activities? If you are not included by others in their social activities do you become more withdrawn, angry and isolated from other activities? (*suggestions: monitor your thoughts, challenge angry thoughts or thoughts that increase your isolation. Accept invitations to participate in things. Look for activities you might enjoy and have a go.*)
- Do you become self-conscious and worry about being evaluated by your lecturers, classmates and peers? Do you worry about what people think of you and assume it is negative? (*suggestions: try to get out of your own head – think about things outside you rather than getting caught by unhelpful, self-hating thoughts*)
- Do you avoid meeting people and involving yourself in new situations? Do you have difficulty introducing yourself, making telephone calls and participating in group activities? (*suggestions: see if you can just pretend to be ok in one situation. Imagine how it may feel and what it would look like to feel more confident – like make eye contact, stand up straight, walk with confidence – see if you can pretend to be that for a short time.*)
- Do you perceive yourself in a negative way? Do you become overly critical of your physical appearance or your actions? (*suggestions: think of someone in your life who you feel good with – it could be a friend from long ago, it could be a teacher or aunt or anyone. Think about how they would describe you. Hold on to those thoughts about yourself.*)
- Do you depend on the people around you to build your self-esteem and to initiate activities? (*suggestion: deliberately write down 3 positive things that you've seen or that have happened each day. Keep a tally of every positive little thing like "the sun feels good", "Sally said hello", "I felt really energetic" etc. Notice, and challenge unhelpful thoughts.*)

- Do you feel isolated, alone, misunderstood and unhappy about your situation and can see no way out of the way you feel or think there is no one to help. (*suggestion: come and talk with us at ANU Counselling.*) Phone 61780455 or go to <http://www.anu.edu.au/students/health-safety-wellbeing/counselling/anu-counselling>

Loneliness can be overcome. But it depends on YOU.

Loneliness can be changed. It is a very common experience. If you are lonely, do something about it:

- Talk to someone (even “hello” can be a start).
- Just have a go at one small thing each week – say “hello” to one person the first week, to two the next. Smile.
- Notice your small successes (like someone smiling back or saying “hello”).
- Learn to enjoy life by developing your social skills. Notice what other people do to make contact – how do they start a conversation? Imagine being someone you admire and use the behaviours that you’ve seen them use. Check out what you can learn from movies or books or on the net about developing social skills. Start with little steps.
- If you see someone that you like, don't just sit there and hope that the person will come to you. Make the first move.
- Ask people about themselves – what course they are studying, how they like the lecturer... You don't need to entertain people, just be interested.
- Chat on-line to other people. This can be a good way to experiment with social skills and talking with other people without having to face them. (You can start by trying the chat rooms in games areas in social networks online e.g. facebook, messenger etc.)
- Do some volunteer work like becoming a Mentor to new students via the set4anu program (see <http://www.anu.edu.au/students/information-for/new-students/set4anuprogram>). Helping others will boost your self-esteem.
- When you are alone, use the time to enjoy yourself rather than to think about unhappy things or worry. For example, listen to music or watch a favorite television show. Do not spend the time worrying about what someone said or what they may have thought. You will only increase the distress you feel and that will make it harder to make contact other people.
- Seek out situations that enable you to get involved with other students.
 - check out the clubs and societies on campus and join one (anusa.com.au/life/clublist/)
 - Get involved with the Students Association (anusa.com.au)
 - Ask someone in your class to be your study partner or discuss the readings/essay topics.
 - Avoid seeking an intimate relationship as a first step. They take time to develop. Look to develop friendships as a first point and develop your social skills and a positive outlook.

***Acknowledgement: Adapted from State University of New York Counselling Centre pamphlet and University of Illinois Counselling Centre pamphlet**